DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 370 113 CS 214 324

AUTHOR Hall, Thelma R.
TITLE Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper": A Surrealistic Portrayal of a Woman's Arrested Development.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Art Criticism; Cultural Context; *Females; *Feminism; Higher Education; Individual Development; *Interdisciplinary Approach; *Literary Criticism; Nineteenth Century Literature; *Surrealism; United States Literature
IDENTIFIERS *Gilman (Charlotte Perkins); *Yellow Wallpaper (The)

ABSTRACT

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a revolt against what she labels as "Androcentric Culture" where men have access to the world while women have access only to the home and where "the common humanity" of women has largely been ignored. Salvadore Dali's "The Object as Revealed in Surrealist Experiment," Michel Carrouges' "Andre Breton and the Basic Concepts of Surrealism" and other art theorists reveal the extent to which Perkins employs ideas similar to those of surrealism to criticize the condition of women in American society in the late nineteenth century. Exposing students to the relationships between major areas of study, such as, art, literature, psychology and women's studies, illuminates the meaning behind the climatic moments in the story, when the narrator, having been confined to a bedroom papered with yellow wallpaper, believes that she sees a woman entrapped behind the paper's ornate design. As her madness intensifies, she identifies herself with the trapped woman until subject-object relations become confused: the two women become one. In surrealist works, according to Haim N. Finkelstein, the metamorphosis of subject and object, the "change of role," is "an act of defiance against the mediocrity of life, a gesture of liberation from the accepted notions of usage and function"--the ability to see what lies beyond external appearance is enhanced. (Contains 11 references.) (TB)

Thelma R. Hall

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper": A Surrealistic Portrayal of a Woman's Arrested Development

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a revolt against what she labels an "Androcentric Culture" where men have access to the world while women have access only to the home and where "the common humanity" of women has largely been ignored (Gilman, The Man-Made World 13). While this story, first published in 1892, predates the full-length works the author wrote to protest the arrested development of women and predates the surrealist manifestoes of the 1920's, her study of madness resulting from the entrapment of the spirit has much in common with surrealists who found "a tragic conflict between the powers of the spirit and the conditions of life. . .born of an enormous despair. . .(Carrouges 1). William Gaunt points out in his work The Surrealists that from its beginning, Surrealism was "never a school but an expression in a particular form of freedom in mind and spirit" (47). He also stresses that there were surrealist writers before Surrealism in art was formulated into a movement. Certainly the Gothic writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Maturin, Ann Radcliffe, and others come to mind. Moreover, given Gilman's background in art (Her first husband Walter Stetson was an artist and she, herself, worked for a time as a commercial artist and art teacher), it is logical to assume that she could have known the early precursors of surrealism. One such was the pre-Romantic English painter of Swiss origin, Henry Fuseli, who considered dreams to be "one of the most unexplored regions of art" and who did not question the existence of "an extensive hinterland of the mind" (Smejkal 13).

What caused Gilman's anguish and what inspired her story of a woman's descent into madness was her own sense of the injustice done to women by a culture which denied them full humanity. One of Gilman's biographers, Mary Hill, records Gilman's desire for wholeness as a human being as early as age twenty-one. Above all, Gilman wrote that she wanted "to gain in individual strength and development of personal power of character, myself as a self, you know, not merely as a woman, or that useful animal a wife and mother. . ."( ). Barbara Welter summarized the condition of women in the nineteenth century when she wrote that "The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues--piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife--woman" (21).

In her attempt to gain wholeness for herself and other women, Gilman began writing articles for Woman's Journal and for People, a more radical voice for women's suffrage. Her story "The Yellow Wallpaper," was the first of her works to examine the restrictive life of women. From this short story she progressed to full-length books such as her highly acclaimed work Women and Economics, published in 1898, and The Man-Made World: Our Androcentric Culture, published in 1911. In Women and Economics, she wrote that man has developed his humanity because he has been able to grow and participate in all aspects of culture--art, music, science, religion--all that makes us human" while "woman has been checked, starved, aborted in human growth" (74f.). And in The Man-Made World, she wrote, "To the man, the whole world was his world; his because he was male; and the whole world of woman was the home; because she was female" (23). Gilman felt strongly

that "only as we live, think, feel, and work outside the home, do we become humanly developed, civilized, socialized" (Women 222).

Gilman came to be a strong advocate for women's rights to full humanity, however, only after suffering years of aborted productivity and frustration of spirit. Her own life can be closely related to that of her narrator in her story "The Yellow Wallpaper." After her marriage and subsequent birth of her daughter, she experienced bouts of depression, or "hysteria," as it was described in her day, and perhaps temporary insanity. No one really understood how sick she was or for that matter really understood mental illness, but "earnest friends" encouraged her to use her will power to fight off depression (Hill 128). The "cure" prescribed for her by a physician, Silas Weir Mitchell, was as follows:

> Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time... Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours' intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live.

The "cure" nearly drove Gilman over the edge into insanity as she clearly describes when she writes, "I made a rag baby, hung it on a doornob and played with it. I would crawl into remote closets and under beds--to hide from the grinding pressure of that profound distress" (Hill 149f., quoted from The Living 96). While she wrote of this cure much later in her life, only three years later, in 1890, she transferred her own life experience into a poignant account of a woman's decline into madness in "The Yellow Wallpaper."

"The Yellow Wallpaper," first published in New England Magazine in 1892, concerns a woman who has been brought to a long untenanted country estate by her physician husband for much the same reasons described by Gilman above and for much the same cure. The fact that her husband is a physician doubles the irony of his intended cure for his wife. He does not believe his wife is sick but "assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with [her] but temporary nervous depression--a slight hysterical tendency" brought on by her intellectual pursuits, more particularly by her writing of imaginative "fancies" (443). Revealing her identity with the spirit of surrealists who had a "complete distrust of a world perceived through logical reasoning" (Finkelstein 5), Gilman has her narrator say of her husband, "John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures." Whereas she feels that "congenial work, with excitement and change" would be good for her, her husband forbids her to work and specifically forbids her to write (443). In Women and Economics, Gilman was later to say that a woman who writes "must conceal her writing under her sewing when callers came because 'to sew' was a feminine verb, and 'to write' was a masculine one" (53). Certainly, in her own life, as Hill states, "she believed that self-assertion, in her case, the need to read, write, exercise, work, and jaunt about with politically committed friends, was crucial to her mental health" (153). "The Yellow Wallpaper" progresses as the narrator describes the state of her mind in hurried, secret writings that grow more and more surreal as the story progresses. Gilman compounds irony in this story by using images of imprisonment both outside and inside the house. Describing the outside, the narrator writes that it is a

beautiful place but adds, "there are hedges and walls and gates that lock" (444). The bedroom, chosen, of course, by her husband, is a former nursery with barred windows, and the world outside these windows takes on a subtle connotation as she describes "those mysterious deep-shaded arbors, the riotous old-fashioned flowers and bushes and gnarly trees" where she imagines she sees people walking about, but she remembers that she is supposed to use her will to hold down such fancies.

Knowing Gilman's reactions to what she terms an "Androcentric Culture" where women are debarred from experiencing full humanity in being denied travel, artistic expression, and work outside the home, the setting's prison-like description takes on special significance. Besides the barred windows, the room has a bed fastened to the floor, a reference no doubt to Gilman's as well as her narrator's restrictive wife-woman role in marriage and in life. The central focus of the room, however, is the ugly yellow wallpaper which becomes the obsessive object of the wife's attention. At first she is merely offended aesthetically by the paper's "sprawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin." Then, as her obsession with it grows, she says, "when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide--plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions" (445). Later, as her madness increases, she personifies the wallpaper, saying, "The paper looks at me as if it knew what a vicious influence it had." Then the personification moves into surrealism when she says,

> There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like
> a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside
> down. . .up and down and sideways they crawl, and those

absurd unblinking eyes are everywhere. There is one place where two breadths didn't match, the eyes go all up and down the line, and one a little higher than the other. 446)

One imagines a painting by Salvadore Dali when Gilman's narrator describes the sub-pattern in the paper. But whereas some of Dali's images were pleasant images, a more spiritual inner self in the midst of outer confusion (in such paintings as Dali's "Valasquez Painting," "Hallucinogenis Toreador," and "Discovery of America"), Gilman's images of both the outer and inner designs of the paper are irritating in much the same way as was her inner and outer life. The narrator says,

> This wallpaper has a kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, and not clearly then. But in the places where the sun is just so--I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design.

She studies the wallpaper for hours, trying "to follow that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion" (447). As her obsession with the paper grows, its surreal pattern's relationship to her trapped spirit, the "pointless pattern" of her own life, is also more pronounced. She now can see nothing in the design of the paper except the figure of a woman "stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern . . . The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out"

(449). Now that this image has emerged, the narrator becomes so absorbed in the paper that her excitement with life returns. She even fears that her husband will take her away before she has found out about the woman in the paper, or, by implication, be forced back into his world before she can discover and free her own inner self. Sometimes she imagines a great many women shake the paper. As they crawl around behind the front pattern, trying to get out, she says, "They get through and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white (449). But while the pattern forms bars in the moonlight, by day the women seem to get out because she can see them from all her windows, creeping in the lanes and gardens, hiding when someone approaches. As the trapped women, both inside and outside, are merging into the narrator herself, her sympathy increases. She associates their creeping movements with the humiliation suffered by herself and other women whose mental and physical movements have been restricted by society when she says, "Most women do not creep by daylight. . .I don't blame her a bit. It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight. I always lock the door when I creep by daylight" (452).

Finally, her mind gone, she locks herself in her room and begins pulling off all the paper in an attempt to free the woman inside. Ironically, she plans to tie her with a rope when she frees her to prevent her getting away. Then, having become one with the freed woman, she ties the rope around herself and says, "It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please" (452).

It is at this point in the story that one realizes the remarkable similarity in Gilman's focus on object and subject and Salvadore Dali's views of the Surrealist concept of the object. His essay, published in 1932, entitled "The Object as Revealed

in Surrealist Experiment," parallels closely the way Gilman handles her narrator's actions. Dali makes the following points:

1. The object exists outside us, without our taking part in it. . .;
2. The object assumes the immovable shape of desire and acts upon our contemplation. . .;
3. The object is moveable and such that it can be acted upon. . .;
4. The object tends to bring about our fusion with it and makes us pursue the formation of a unity with it. . . .

(Finkelstein, from Lippard, Surrealists on Art 87-96).

In Surrealist works, according to Finkelstein, the metamorphosis of subject and object, the "change of role," is "an act of defiance against the mediocrity of life, a gesture of liberation from the accepted notions of usage and function; it enhances man's ability to see what lies beyond external appearance and thereby gain in self-knowledge" (65). To the Surrealist, surrender to the object, disintegration of the external self, and reintegration of the old self with new insights, were voluntary, but for Gilman's narrator, the imagined world becomes more real than the rational world of tenable but unreachable things denied to women. Unable to experience the world of her imagination, lose herself in her work and integrate the imagined with the world of everyday life, she loses identity, and her disintegration is total. Andre Breton commented that "surrealism tends to work toward total disintegration toward a synthesis of all contradictions." He asked the question, "How can one overcome all contradictions without first abandoning oneself to them completely?" (Carrouges 71).

Becoming one with the vision of the crawling woman is the epitome of unification on the one hand but the epitome of disintegration without the redemption of synthesis on the other. For Gilman's narrator, synthesis of outer and inner worlds merely tightened the bars of imprisonment, for she now has become what she had psychologically perceived herself to be, trapped inside a restrictive society, inside a limited selfhood, inside an object, within a barred room.

Gilman's character's inner conception of herself became so grotesque a model that it colored her concept of all reality and gradually the grotesqueness overcame her. But one wonders whether Gilman is not in the end reversing the male/female stereotypical roles where male is rational, logical and female is irrational, illogical. When the narrator's husband tries to get her to open the door and starts to chop it down with an axe, she calmly tells him that he does not have to use force but will find the key "under the plantain leaf" in the yard where she has tossed it. Perhaps this is Gilman's utmost irony--allowing her seemingly crazed narrator to imply that the key to opening doors is in the natural order of things, that it is unnatural to force her into a world of logic where sex distinctions have limited her humanity. When her husband finds the key, the truth, too late, he discovers her repeating the helpless, misdirected crawling of a bewildered child. When he faints upon seeing her, she merely crawls over him. Now he is a mere object, and no longer an obstacle in her way.

Like the Surrealists, Gilman's story seems "born of an enormous despair prompted by the conditions to which man is reduced on earth" but without their comparable "hope in human metamorphosis" (Carrouges 1). And like them, her story is a revolt against the conditions which cause a reduction in the humanity of the

individual. Gilman's narrator, like her counterparts in real life, was a woman whose creativity, indeed her whole life, was controlled by the fixed sex roles in society. It is not difficult to compare the surrealists' dilemma to that of women in the nineteenth century. In surrealism, Carrouges writes, "It is not emptiness, but rather an excess of being, which causes his anguish. And so, far from finding life absurd because devoid of meaning, there is a sense of fatality which pierces to the depth of being" (43). It is this pent up "excess of being," this arrested development, that leaves women unfulfilled, and leaves the narrator of this story trapped in an infantile world, locked in a nursery with barred windows, crawling on all-fours, both mentally and emotionally reduced to a helpless state. If, as Breton wrote in The Artistic Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism, " a work of art cannot be considered Surrealist unless the artist strains to reach the total psychophysical realm of which consciousness is only a small part" (Smejkal 11), then Gilman's haunting short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," which, she wrote, she said, "to save people from being driven crazy" (Lane 124, quoted from The Forerunner 271), meets the criteria of a Surrealist work.

The value of using this paper to study Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story in the college classroom is twofold: (1) The paper is interdisciplinary, showing relationships between two major areas, literature and art, and including within its context a subject of interest to Women's Studies and Psychology in

dealing with the plight of women at the turn of the century. The unscientific treatment of mental illness in women and the repressed social, economic, and emotional life of women at that time are seen encapsulated in Gilman's story. (2) The paper shows how critical thinking skills in any discipline can enable students to see interrelated areas of interest in a new light and synthesize these areas in writing and thinking.

Thelma R. Hall, Ph.D.

1994

Works Cited

Carrouges, Michel. Andre Breton and the Basic Concepts of Surrealism. Trans. Maura Prendergant. Univ. of Alabama, 1974.

Finkelstein, Haim N. Surrealism and the Crisis of the Object. Ann Arbor, Mich.: Univ. Microfilms International, 1979.

Gaunt, William. The Surrealists. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1972.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. The Home, Its Work, and Influence. New York: McClure, Phillips, 1903.

_____. The Man-Made World or Our Androcentric Culture. New York: Charlton, 1911.

_____. Women and Economics. Boston: Small, Maynard, 1898.

_____. "The Yellow Wallpaper," Fictions, 2nd Ed., Joseph F. Trimmer and C. Wade Jennings, Eds. New York: Harcourt, 1989.

Hill, Mary A. Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Making of a Radical Feminist, 1860-1896. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1980.

Lane, Ann J. To Herland and Beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman. New York: Pantheon, 1990.

Smejkal, Frantisek. Surrealist Drawings. Trans. Till Gottheimer. London: Octopus Books, 1974.

Welter, Barbara. Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century. Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1976.